

Preserving the Landscape of Cinque Terre

by Danielle Machotka

Ercole is a spry septuagenarian in shorts leading us up a slope outside of Vernazza, in Cinque Terre. His job this morning is to rebuild part of a dry-laid stone wall that is holding up half the mountain we're standing on. We're here, for better or worse, to help.

Ercole sounds just enough like Hercules to work for me. In fact, as I watch his labors, he seems very much like a Hercules. Ten of us eagerly try to supply him with the right size stones at just the right time, but a partial language barrier and a total experience gap keep us always a step-and-a-half behind him. He lifts, places, adjusts and changes his mind, not slowed by the heat radiating off the wall or the glare of the sun on the local rock. The master plan for each stone evolves as he works, yet is buried in tradition.

Vernazza is one of five towns in Cinque Terre ("Five Lands"), a dramatic, romantic stretch of coast at the top of the shin of Italy's boot, facing the Mediterranean. The town winds down to the sea, following the path of the riverbed it covers and opening up to the sea at the river's former mouth, now a sheltered harbor with colorful dinghies and small cruising boats that moor for the day. Vernazza, like all five lands, has layers of buildings stepping up the hillsides and separated by narrow, winding, footpath-streets.

Transportation between towns is limited to train, boat or foot, the last meaning hiking the roller-coaster trails, with the promise of one postcard view after another. The seaside mountains afford unforgettable views of sapphire water, snaking valleys, slopes that have been sculpted into washboard orchards, and the five hamlets that seem to defy gravity to hug the terrain. Everyone lands in Vernazza at some point.

I've come for a three-day program to help protect the landscape of Cinque Terre. It doesn't look particularly fragile, but it turns out to be threatened by the very activity that brought me to Europe—tourism. Tourists are loving Cinque Terre to destruction, and the organizers of our program are trying to find ways to involve travelers in the preservation of a landscape and way of life they treasure.

The working holiday program, *Protect the Landscape of Vernazza*, is actually an experiment in sustainable tourism run by the Italian Environmental Impact Assessment Center (EIA) and the Municipality of Vernazza. Participants devote four hours of each morning to repairing the landscape and participating in the work that locals do daily. In exchange, they get a deeper understanding of local culture while working, eating, and conversing with *Vernazzani*.

Our hosts, guides, and soon-to-be friends, Alessandro Villa and Olga Chitotti, both work for the EIA. Alessandro is a sixth-generation Vernazzano with a passion for preserving his town. Yet he understands that tourism is a reality, that a place as lovely as Cinque Terre will only draw more and more visitors, and that he and his colleagues will have to develop creative ways to address the impact of that pressure.

Alessandro and Olga conceived of this program and worked alongside us the whole time, lifting stones while commenting on life in Vernazza, hiking the trails and discussing the condition of the landscape, sipping a glass of wine and sharing their hope for Cinque Terre's future.

Several of our conversations took place over remarkable dinners prepared by townspeople eager to parade the local gastronomy. The first evening began with olives, anchovies and deep-fried pumpkin flowers—more addictive than French fries—followed by pasta with basil and tomato, cheeses, salad, frittata with vegetables, and fruit. We drank local wine and a liqueur called Persechino that Alessandro had made, with white wine, grappa, pear leaves, almonds and alcohol.

The next day, under gray skies and foggy brains, we donned gloves and grabbed large plastic garbage bags as we headed up the path to Monterosso, north of Vernazza. Our task was trail cleaning, and we didn't have to look far to find the refuse of our fellow hikers. Heavy green rubber gloves pulled up as high as they would go, I set to the task of picking up piles of used tissues, water bottles and caps, plastic bags, sandwich wrappers, and items too unpleasant to mention. "Pack Your Trash" is not a mantra in Cinque Terre. How easily people can detach the beauty of their surroundings from their responsibility to keep it that way! Our heads were as full of grumblings about messy tourists as our bags were full of their mess when we headed down the mountain. We met the edge of a rainstorm as we passed the last of the vineyards before town.

That evening we sat under large umbrellas in the Piazza Marconi and continued our explorations of the cuisine. Ristorante Gianni prepared anchovies with lemon, pepper and olive oil; linguine with pesto (native to Liguria and made better than anywhere); ravioli with tomato and anchovy sauce; fried assorted seafood; stuffed mussels; and a dish layered with potato, anchovy and tomato sauce. We were too full for the tiramisu, but who was going to say no? Between bites we met Alessandro's family and friends as they wandered by on their evening walks.

Overnight, the rain and clouds blew away, leaving our third day saturated with color. The town was a kaleidoscope of red, orange, yellow, pink and green, slowly sinking below us as we climbed the terraces to Bartolo's vineyards. Bartolo is Ercole's son, another link in the chain of continuity that characterizes life and labor in Cinque Terre. Slowly our work party grew to include Ercole, Bartolo's wife, Lise, and his brother, Paolo, and several local characters who spoke to us in rapid, jovial, chat-while-you-work Italian, not caring that few of us understood.

I crouched to get under the odd vineyard that sloped gently away from me on the narrow terrace. Grapevines in Cinque Terre are trained to grow up about four feet and then horizontally, forming a canopy under which the grapes grow, protected from the ocean winds. What looks like an

unruly vine from the top shelters a bounty of grape clusters, future Nectar of the Gods, underneath. As I settled into the dark underbelly of the vineyard, I was enveloped by the musty smell of soil and the heady aroma of ripe fruit. The wet earth slowly soaked my seat as I sat, clippers in hand, and loaded basket after basket with Chardonnay grapes.

Snipping away at their harvest, Bartolo and Lise, who both speak excellent English, told us about wine making in Vernazza. They make all their own, of several varieties, selling some and trading what they don't drink for other locally-produced goods. And they still do most of it by hand, using methods that have been used for generations.

One exception is the way they take the grapes into town. After hours of clipping and picking out the spoiled grapes and raisins, the bulging baskets have to get from the terraces to the crushing vats below. These days, they coast down in motorized carts on tracks or pulleys. In earlier times, it was more difficult. Bartolo and Alessandro bravely demonstrated how workers used to carry the bins of grapes on the back of the neck with a rolled-up T-shirt underneath for padding. I made a point of extolling the fabulous pulley system.

In celebration of a good harvest and the completion of our work, Alessandro and Olga prepared the dinner for our last evening: ravioli filled with vegetables and cheese, macaroni with a fresh tomato sauce, salad, cheeses, stuffed vegetables, and local wine. Another home brew of Alessandro's, Vin Santo, topped off the night.

Over the course of the three days, we learned about the impact that tourism has on a small town like Vernazza. The population of 800 doubles on a typical summer day. Tourists glide in on boats, zoom through town for a couple of hours, buy gelato, post cards, and t-shirts, and leave for the next town. Others hike in, using the well-worn trails that connect each of the five lands. Some stay for a night or two, some return every year.

All create waste. The cost of solid waste disposal in Vernazza goes up almost six-fold from January to August. Sanitary sewer lines and water treatment plants are extended to capacity. Nature-loving hikers increase the potential of erosion with every footstep. Invariably, someone gets injured on the trails, necessitating a local rescue effort. Volunteers with a stretcher have to hike to the injured tourist and carry him to town—budgets don't allow for helicopters and Med-Evac teams.

None of this is immediately fatal to the well-being of Vernazza, but it is eating away at the landscape of the surroundings and the resources of the town. Tourism and agriculture are the primary industries; neither creates great financial surpluses. Alessandro and Olga hope that the working holiday program will take the first step towards solving the problem by raising awareness.

It worked for me. One stone wall is repaired, a stretch of trail is cleaned, and the grapes we picked are crushed and aging in bottles. But I can see there's still much to do. And Ercole would love a few good helpers.

To take part:

To find out more about the program or to sign up, visit their Web site at
<http://www.protectcinqueterre.com>